

Sang Yu, *Xiong Shili's Understanding of Reality and Function, 1920-1937*. Leiden and
Boston: Brill, 2020, 260 pages.

Philippe Major

Institute for European Global Studies, University of Basel, Basel, Switzerland

E-mail: philippe.major@unibas.ch

*This is a preprint of an article published in Dao. The final authenticated
version is available online at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-020-09769-2>.*

Sang Yu's 桑雨 monograph on Xiong Shili's 熊十力 understanding of Reality (*ti* 體) and Function (*yong* 用) is an important addition to the Brill series on modern Chinese philosophy. Although Xiong is often mentioned in Anglophone scholarship for his role in establishing the ontological basis of New Confucian philosophy, few scholars, apart from John Makeham, who has translated Xiong's *Xin weishi lun* 新唯識論 into English (*New Treatise on the Uniqueness of Consciousness*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), have taken the time to decipher Xiong's complex philosophical system. Despite the fact that Xiong is often regarded as one of the most important Chinese philosophers of the last century, this is in fact the first English-language monograph entirely dedicated to Xiong's philosophy. This in itself marks Sang's work as an important step forward in the field of modern Chinese philosophy.

Sang's monograph, which adopts a history of philosophy (as a sub-discipline of philosophy) approach, has a dual goal. Its main aim is to "reveal the evolution of Xiong's understanding of Reality and Function" between 1920 and 1937, "a crucial phase in his philosophical development" (4) leading to the establishment of what is often construed as the cornerstone of Xiong's philosophy, that is his theory of the non-duality of Reality and Function (*tiyong bu'er lun* 體用不二論). Since Xiong's understanding of *ti* and *yong* form the core of his philosophy, Sang argues, having a better understanding

of the evolution that led to its mature expression, which she sees as taking place in the 1932 edition of the *Xin weishi lun*, will “make his whole philosophical system more intelligible” (4).

This approach is commendable, as scholars have until now been far more concerned with Xiong’s *Xin weishi lun* (in any of its many editions), and few, with the exception again of John Makeham, have paid attention to Xiong’s earlier works. As such, of great value is Sang’s detailed analysis of Xiong’s construal of *ti* and *yong* in what Xiong considered early drafts of his *Xin weishi lun*: the 1923 and 1926 editions of *Weishixue gailun* 唯識學概論 (*A General Account of Yogācāra Learning*) and the *Weishi lun* 唯識論 (*Treatise on Yogācāra*), usually regarded as having been published in 1930, although Sang argues in an appendix there is no evidence to support this.

Her second goal is to retrace the intellectual resources from which Xiong drew in order to develop his construal of Reality and Function during this period. This is not an easy task, as intellectual influence remains a slippery slope, given how much room it allows for interpretation, conjecture, and supposition. Despite such difficulties, Sang’s attempt at tracing the historical origins of Xiong’s thought, both Neo-Confucian and Buddhist, is extremely valuable, as it allows us to see the remarkable syncretism at work in Xiong’s philosophy, and in the process debunk the idea that Xiong is *exclusively* a Confucian philosopher. Sang is particularly skilled at navigating the difficult terrain of Buddhist terminologies, which form an important resource of Xiong’s.

After briefly introducing the goal of the study, the introduction is for the most part devoted to a biographical account of Xiong, emphasizing his early involvement in revolutionary activities, his disillusion with politics after 1911, and his “transition from revolution to scholarship and learning,” which Sang ascribes to Xiong’s decision to “take a new approach to saving the nation and the people” (22), presumably by enlightening the minds of the citizenry. Sang also pays close attention to Xiong’s relationships with his contemporaries (Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, Lin Zaiping 林宰平, Ma Yifu 馬一浮, etc.). She notably relates Xiong’s slow transition from Yogācāra to Confucianism during the period she studies to his contacts with Liang Shuming and the influence of the movements for “the promotion of the ‘national essence’ and the ‘reorganisation of the national heritage’” (26).

The first chapter, which provides a contextual framework for Sang's main analysis in the following chapters, is divided in three sections. In the first, Sang gives a brief but useful account of the historical process whereby the non-dual construal of *ti* and *yong* "became a mainstream idea" (69). She traces this construal back to Sengzhao 僧肇, before relating its evolution in the *Dasheng qi xin lun* 大乘起信論, in Fazang 法藏, and in various Neo-Confucian figures. In the second section, Sang discusses Xiong's conception of the relation between the ontological and the phenomenal before 1920, which she argues was heavily influenced by the work of Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 and Zhang Taiyan 章太炎. Although Xiong does not seem to be using the *ti-yong* pair at the time, Sang sees in Xiong's early views on the ontological/phenomenal divide an important ground on which his later exposition of *ti* and *yong* would grow. Finally, in the last section, Sang gives a short account of the dispute between Ouyang Jingwu 歐陽竟無 and his students Lü Cheng 呂澂 and Wang Enyang 王恩洋 on the one hand and Taixu 太虛 on the other. While the former group opposed the view that *ti* can be active and can thus manifest itself in phenomena—a deviation from "genuine Buddhism" they ascribed to the *Dasheng qi xin lun*—Taixu supported such an active understanding of *ti*. Sang concludes that the views on *ti* and *yong* later developed by Xiong—who studied under Ouyang until 1922, the year marking the beginning of the debates—were "inspired" (70) by the debates and "were probably his response to" them (69).

Sang's main argument chronological unfolds in the remaining chapters. In chapter two, she gives an overview of Xiong's take on *ti* and *yong* between 1920 and 1923, mostly by relying on a close textual analysis of the first edition of *Weishixue gailun*. Sang's main argument is that although this work is aimed at introducing Yogācāra, he deviated from the Dharmapāla 護法-Xuanzang 玄奘 tradition in upholding a two-level conception of *ti* and *yong*, on the basis of the Madhyamaka doctrine of the two truths. From the perspective of conventional truth, Xiong portrays productive power (功能) and manifest activity (現行) as *ti* and *yong* respectively, although the two remain non-dual in the sense that the latter is but the manifestation of the potentiality latent in the former. Yet from the perspective of absolute truth, productive power and manifest activity are but two aspects of consciousness, which is *yong*, while *ti* is reserved to refer to suchness (真如). Although Xiong claims that at this level "Reality

is revealed through Function” (104), Sang interprets this to mean that consciousness (Function) is but an apophatic mode of explanation (遮詮) used to obliquely reveal suchness. Given that consciousness is not the phenomenal manifestation of an ontological *ti*, but rather a nominal construct that can guide the reader toward suchness, its relation to suchness cannot be conceived by appealing to a non-dual interpretation of *ti-yong*.

In the 1926 edition of *Weishixue gailun*, which Sang analyzes in the following chapter, Xiong shows growing dissatisfaction with Dharmapāla. This led him to revise his conceptualization of the level of conventional truth (the relation between consciousness, productive power, and manifest activity), although Xiong retained his two-truth construal of *ti-yong*. The main difference Sang highlights between the 1923 and 1926 editions is that in the latter, Xiong identifies Reality—at the level of conventional truth—with the “entire process of ceaseless transformation,” which manifests itself, phenomenally, through the dual impetuses of compression (屈) and extension (申)—the equivalent of the conceptual pair of contraction (翕) and expansion (闢) in the *Xin weishi lun*. However, in the *Weishi lun*—also covered in chapter 3—Xiong abandons the two-truth model and posits productive power and the “entire process of ceaseless transformation” themselves as ontological Reality (*ti*), which is illusorily manifested in the myriad phenomena. By abandoning the two-truth distinction, the *Weishi lun* describes for the first time the relation between Reality and Function as a non-dual one, in the sense that “Function was nominally established on the basis of ontological Reality and so was no different from ontological Reality” (168) (Sang could have here elaborated further on how a nominal construct can be “no different” from an undifferentiated ontological Reality). It is precisely this non-dual approach to *ti-yong* on which Xiong further elaborates in the 1932 *Xin weishi lun*—the main subject of the last chapter.

The 1932 work saw important changes in Xiong’s philosophical views. For one thing, he for the first time contends that all sentient beings share one and the same Reality—instead of having each their own, as he maintained in his previous works. Xiong further associates this shared Reality with the inherent mind (本心) endowed to everyone at birth, an idea he borrows from Wang Yangming 王陽明.

Xiong also distinguishes, on the basis of the notion of “the two aspects of the one mind” (一心二門) of the *Dasheng qi xin lun*, that the consciousness established in opposition to cognitive objects is but a false consciousness that serves as the Function of the mind-as-Reality. The phenomenal realm is in fact the direct product of this consciousness, in the sense that it is “that as which Reality illusorily appears to us due to our false discriminations” (198). Yet despite their illusory nature, Xiong maintains that each and every phenomenon makes manifest the entirety of Reality. It is on this basis that Xiong can hold a non-dual conception of the *ti-yong* polarity.

Finally, in a short conclusion, Sang summarizes her main points and provides an overview of the various resources from which Xiong’s philosophy drew. She notably does so in order to argue that Xiong’s syncretism, characterized by his method of “using the six classics to explain [his] thought” (六經注我) (221), is put to the task of establishing his own unique “*ti-yong* based metaphysics” (223).

Sang’s three-period interpretation of Xiong’s understanding of *ti* and *yong* is well argued and supported by a great number of passages she translates from the original texts. She is particularly skilled at tracing the possible origins of his syncretism, whether they are found in historical figures or in contemporaries of Xiong’s. Her interpretations of difficult passages from Xiong’s works also benefit from a clear and concise prose, which is of great help when dealing with Xiong’s complex philosophical system.

There are, however, a few questions that remain, at least for me, unanswered by Sang. One is related to the status of Function in the 1932 work. In it, Xiong at times describes Function as an illusory phenomenal realm caused by false discriminations—which means that one must realize phenomena are unreal to see Reality—while at other times it is said that every phenomenal appearance manifests in itself “the entire Reality” (210), so that no distinction can ultimately be made between the myriad phenomena. In both cases, *ti* and *yong* are non-dual in the sense that they do not refer to two separate ontological entities (which seems to be the meaning implied by “non-dual”), but the idea that Function “ontologically [is] no different from Reality” (202) applies (if at all) only to the latter description of *yong*, according to which each phenomenon manifests the entirety of Reality. In the first case (Function

as the illusory product of false discriminations), the ontological status of Function differs in important ways from that of Reality, in the sense that it is ultimately unreal—a mere projection of the deluded consciousness.

Although Sang’s account mentions both interpretations of *yong*, it tends to put greater emphasis on the fact that the “non-individuated Reality manifests itself simultaneously as the various things in the phenomenal world, and each individual thing represents the entire Reality” (216). If that is the case, however, how can we account for Xiong’s repeated claim that in order to see Reality one must seek within and not without? After all, if every phenomenon reveals Reality as a whole, why cannot one seek without? To answer these questions, one must return to the first meaning of *yong* as the illusory projection of false discriminations—which incidentally seems closer to Xiong’s 1923 portrayal of *yong*.

Related to this issue is the fact that ultimately, Xiong draws a sharp distinction, in his 1932 work, between “mind” and “matter,” reserving to the former the ability to manifest Reality fully while describing the latter as a degeneration from the pure state of the inherent mind everyone inherits at birth (even as he maintains that ultimately the two are one and the same). If phenomenal manifestations of “matter” are indeed something one must withdraw from in order to reconnect with one’s inherent mind, what sense does it make to say that every phenomenon reflects Reality? My point is not that Sang is wrong in maintaining Xiong makes the latter claim, but rather that this claim could have been better related to the wider discourse of the *Xin weishi lun* and the many tensions that inform it, notably at the level of Xiong’s dichotomization of mind and matter.

These issues highlight that although Xiong modified his construal of the ontological distinction between *ti* and *yong*, he retained in important ways, from 1923 to 1932, a two-layered use of *ti-yong* as a discursive mean to separate the two levels of truth and two classes of mind—those enlightened and those unenlightened. In other words, while the *ti* of his *ti-yong* discourse might have changed in subtle ways, as Sang persuasively argues, the *yong* (the use) of it appears to have remained consistent at least in important ways. While I found Sang’s discussion convincing, I also felt it could have said more about the uses to which Xiong puts his construal of *ti-yong* and the many tensions that are related to such uses.

This last point is not meant as a criticism of Sang's argument, which I found overall convincing, as much as it is a reminder of the scope of her analysis, which provides an examination of Xiong's views on Reality and Function *from the perspective of ti*. By that, I mean that Sang is less interested in the discursive and social uses of Xiong's construal of *ti-yong* than its metaphysical meaning (although she does relate Xiong's philosophy to the historical context briefly in the conclusion (226-228)). This will be regarded as a strength by some and a weakness by others. Certainly, I expect Sang's choice of perspective will appeal more to those working in the field of modern Chinese philosophy than those devoted to modern Chinese (intellectual) history. Yet there is great value in knowing that modern Chinese philosophy can be studied as philosophically as—say—Kant has been in European languages.

Sang's monograph will serve as a reference for years to come on the topic of Xiong's theory of the non-duality of Reality and Function, a topic that deserves much more attention than it has so far received in European languages. In itself, this is a great contribution to the slowly but steadily expanding field of modern Chinese philosophy.